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ABSTRACT

Citing research indicating that U.S. teachers commonly use verbal persuasion techniques to help low achieving students, this study extends the research to Sri Lanka to explore differences in helping strategies adopted by teachers across cultures. Study participants were 237 Sri Lanka teachers who represented the majority Sinhalese population and who had a median of 13 years of teaching experience. The study used a Sinhalese translation of the Student Assistance Survey (SAS), which contained six scenarios depicting students who are performing poorly and for whom the teacher may have one of three primary objectives: (1) raising students' confidence level, (2) getting students to try harder, or (3) helping students improve their performance. Analysis of the data revealed that the dominant choice across all scenarios was enactive attainments representing actual accomplishment or effort, followed by modeling, anxiety reduction, and verbal persuasion. Active attainments and modeling are oriented toward making immediate and direct changes in students' performances, as opposed to verbal persuasion and anxiety reduction, which are directed toward changing attitudes and emotional states as preconditions for changes in behavior and accomplishments. These patterns suggested that cultural differences related to school expectations and roles of teachers may be quite different, and that the practices of Sri Lankan teachers are rooted in social, economic, and cultural traditions of the country. Sri Lankan teachers were more likely to select direct behavioral interventions as means toward academic objectives, while American teachers tended to choose indirect, more motivational and emotional approaches for resolving academic problems. (Contains 23 references.) (ND)

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Sri Lankan Teachers' Preferred Modes of Helping Students

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Sri Lankan Teachers' Preferred Modes of Helping Students

Teacher effectiveness research indicates that teachers are most likely to influence students' learning when teaching and motivating strategies are adapted to fit their students' abilities and needs (Corno & Snow, 1986). Additionally, teachers' beliefs about the reasons for students' failure plays a role in the decision about strategies the teachers invoke in order to intervene appropriately (Cooper & Burger, 1980; Peterson & Barger, 1984).

Contemporary research related to teacher effectiveness has extended into self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1986). According to Bandura, the four sources of information that affect individuals' perceptions of their chances of success are enactive attainment, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and their own physiological states. Each of these sources may influence self-efficacy judgments in different ways and with varying degrees of intensity and durability.

A person's enactive attainments become powerful information about potential success, because they represent actual accomplishments or efforts toward accomplishments. The feedback that results from personal action has been shown to influence students' perceptions of the results of their actions (Andrews & Debus, 1978; RiCharde & Wang, 1985; Schunk, 1982, 1983, 1986).

Observing a model's efforts and the results of those efforts, vicarious experiences, also serves as a powerful source of information, for the observer is

able to see a relationship between another's behavior and that person's own behavior; mastery behavior by another tends to make someone raise his or her own expectations for similar mastery (Bandura, 1977; Gorrell & Capron, 1988, 1989; McAuley, 1985; Schunk & Hanson, 1985; Zimmerman & Ringle, 1981).

Reliance upon others' encouraging commentary, also known as verbal persuasion, may have salutary effects upon a person's perceived efficacy, although it is conceived of as a weak source of information (Bandura, Adams, & Beyer, 1977; Bandura, 1986), because it often does not relate very closely to the individual's own experience. While teacher expectancy studies have shown that verbal persuasion may help raise a student's self-esteem or self-concept (Combs, Avila, & Purkey, 1978; Coopersmith & Feldman, 1974; Good, Biddle, & Brophy, 1975), these effects may not endure in the face of mastery attempts that have results other than predicted through others' encouraging comments.

Finally, changes in physiological states, such as increases in anxiety, affect individuals' beliefs about their own probabilities of success (Bandura, 1977, 1986) by serving as signals of distress or difficulties in functioning. As individuals monitor their own physiological states, they adjust their expectations for success. A reduction in anxiety, for example, may be accomplished through meditation techniques, and may influence an individual expect success in something that previously was perceived as being too difficult.

With the aforementioned sources of information in mind, one study of teacher helping (Gorrell & Trentham, 1992) investigated the ways that teachers,

themselves, may become sources of information for students who experience difficulties in learning. The researchers found that American teachers typically prefer to use encouragement strategies, verbal persuasion, as their primary way to encourage increased student effort and achievement. Teachers ranked four basic strategies that they might use with students who are failing for one of three possible reasons: low self-confidence, lack of effort, or lack of success. Unique to the study was the use of Bandura's (1977, 1986) hypothesized sources of personal information to categorize the four choices for possible teacher action. For each of six scenarios, responding teachers could adopt strategies based upon increasing success opportunities (enactive attainments), modeling appropriate solutions to academic problems (vicarious experience), reducing anxiety (physiological state), and encouragement (verbal persuasion).

The major finding of the study was that teachers commonly adopt verbal persuasion techniques (a weak source of self-efficacy improvement compared to enactive attainment and vicarious experience) across all types of situations, often as their most popular choice. Because respondents also adjusted their mode of helping depending upon the type of student problem, Gorrell and Trentham suggested that teachers might benefit from knowing more about the relative effectiveness of each mode of helping.

Since teachers' helping strategies are based upon their explicit or implicit attributions about the reasons for academic failure, further research on the conditions under which teachers choose certain interventions is warranted. As a

means of understanding teachers' strategies under differing conditions and of understanding commonalities and differences among teachers' experiences and responses to various situations, cross-cultural investigations of teacher intentions, attributions, and professional beliefs across cultural and political boundaries are potentially productive lines of inquiry. The current study extends the research of Gorrell and Trentham to Sri Lanka in order to explore differences in helping strategies adopted by teachers across cultures, using the same instrument and procedures.

Method

Subjects

Sri Lankan teachers (N = 237) representing the majority Sinhalese population (approximately 80% of the country's population) responded to items on the teaching strategies instrument. Respondents included experienced teachers with up to 37 years of teaching with a median of 13 years of teaching.

Instrument

The Student Assistance Survey (SAS), translated into Sinhala and verified with fluent speakers of English and Sinhala, contains six brief scenarios depicting students who are performing poorly and for whom the teacher may have one of three primary objectives: raising the student's confidence level, getting the student to try harder, or helping the student improve his or her performance. In addition, students are described as having either a low sense of efficacy or a moderate sense of efficacy related to their class work. The objective for each

student in each scenario is indicated and highlighted for the respondents (e.g., "What would you do to raise his/her confidence level?)." An example of the items is provided below:

> A student in your class completes all the assignments that he is given, yet he does not believe that he really is capable of learning new skills. His concentration on the assignments is low because he has low confidence in his abilities. He makes many mistakes which he should not make. What action would you take [to raise his/her confidence level]?

Procedure

Subjects were given the instrument to complete and return to the experimenters at the schools where they were teaching. Participation was voluntary. Participants listed each of the four categories of sources of information: enactive attainments, modeling, verbal persuasion, and reduction of anxiety (physiological state) in the order that they considered them to be important in helping the child.

Results

First-choice responses (i.e, the preferred choice indicated by each teacher) to each scenario were computed and totaled across the six scenarios. The dominant choice across all scenarios was enactive attainments (39.7%), followed by modeling (26.6%), anxiety reduction (17.8%), and verbal persuasion (15.9%).

Insert Table 1 About Here

An investigation of the breakdown of responses according to the type of problem presented in the scenarios (lack of confidence, lack of effort, low performance) showed that Sri Lankan teachers adjust their strategies according to the dominant problem they are addressing. When low confidence was designated as the primary problem for a child, the teachers were more likely to select strategies related to enactive attainment (53.9%), followed by verbal persuasion (17.8%), modeling (17.3%), and anxiety reduction (11.0). When confronted with problems associated with lack of effort, these teachers were most likely to choose a modeling strategy (34.7%), followed by enactive attainment (30.3%), anxiety reduction (21.2%), and verbal persuasion (13.8%). For performance deficits, the teachers resorted most to enactive attainments (35.2%), followed by modeling (27.9%), anxiety reduction (21.5%), and verbal persuasion (15.5%).

Insert Table 2 About Here

Discussion

Showing patterns dissimilar to the study with American teachers (Gorrell & Trentham, 1991), the primary finding from this study is that Sri Lankan teachers do not show high levels of preference for verbal persuasion as a strategy for helping students who are falling short of necessary classroom attainments. The most preferred strategy is enactive attainments as represented by teachers finding ways to alter tasks or help students succeed at easier tasks that lead up to success at more difficult tasks. While some variation in strategy selection occurs when scenarios depict students as having different kinds of problems, enactive attainment ranks among the most popular, if not the most popular strategy, regardless of problem type. That preference is followed closely by modeling strategies, which involve teachers' demonstrating appropriate problem solutions or procedures for accomplishing tasks. This trend in teacher preferences leads us to conclude that enactive-attainment and modeling strategies as means of helping students succeed in the classroom is strongly represented in Sri Lankan teachers' teaching roles. Each of these two approaches is oriented toward making immediate and direct changes in students' performances, as opposed to verbal persuasion and anxiety reduction, which are directed toward changing attitudes and emotional states as preconditions for changes in behavior and accomplishments.

Comparing the results of the two separate studies shows that the main difference between teachers in the USA and Sri Lanka is in this orientation of Sri Lankan teachers for more direct means of influencing student behavior and self-

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efficacy, while American teachers tend to prefer the indirect means of using verbal persuasion. Of course, this is not an absolute difference. For the low-effort scenarios, teachers from both countries chose enactive attainment as a major strategy for helping; for American teachers, that was the most commonly chosen strategy, and for the Sri Lankan teachers it was a close second choice (30.3%) to modeling (34.7%). It appears that both American and Sri Lankan teachers are more likely to attribute lack of effort to students' needs for better instruction or better opportunities for success, and thus attempt to remedy low-effort situations by providing occasions for successes that may reinforce the students' efforts.

The patterns observed in this study suggest that cultural differences related to school expectations and roles of teachers may be quite different. The orientation of teacher roles towards enactive attainment and modeling has it's roots in social, economic and cultural traditions of the country. Involving children in hands-on activities for learning appears to have developed with the apprenticeship tradition of the ancient social system where children learned their trades, arts, and crafts as apprentices under their parents or family elders in the home-based workshop or the paddy field or farm land which often times belonged to the family. Even at the present time children do a lot of hands-on activities not with factory-manufactured material but with nature's products found in their environment. Children learned by doing things on their own or sometimes with adult assistance. Children get ample opportunities to learn things by involving themselves in activities at home, in the community, in the temple and in the school.

Under the ancient system of education children also learned things like native medicines, astrology, arts, and crafts from the Guru (teacher) by living in teacher's house (Guru Gedera) as a domestic aide. The Pirivena (Buddhist temple school) too had a similar system. Children learned their letters and other arts and sciences from the Buddhist priest and the priest got them involved in numerous sorts of activities including work that laymen have to do in the temple. These traditions have developed into a system where teachers encourage children learn by doing things themselves with teacher's guidance and assistance.

Starting in the 1940s, modern educational systems in Sri Lanka incorporated "handwork" into the school curricula as different crafts, like carpentry, metal work, pottery, mat weaving, coir work, agriculture, gardening etc. In present day education, especially in the primary (elementary) classes, teachers have been trained and encouraged to adopt activity based strategies in the classroom instructional practices as far as possible. Thus, it is natural for Sri Lankan teachers to think in terms of providing specific, enactive attainments as a route to understanding and school achievement.

The use of the strategy of modeling is mostly related to the religious background not forgetting the social, cultural, and economic norms of the community. The society expects the parents and elders to be role models in the family and the community. In Buddhist teachings the teacher is well respected, venerated and in fact worshipped by students. Teachers are expected to be of exemplary character, exhibiting their learned nature and mannerisms to their

students as role models. The tradition has the popular saying that "setting an example (being exemplary) is greater (more sacred) than the advice". In an earlier study, Gorrell and Dharmadasa (1991) found that one of the most common themes related to significant teachers in their own education was that of the teacher who was or became a model of behavior and learning, suggesting that this dimension of teacher behavior is salient in the thinking of students and teachers.

In the aforementioned study of pre-service teachers, Gorrell and Dharmadasa (1991) also found that American pre-service teachers tended to describe their most influential teachers as ones who motivated them or who got them interested in particular subjects, such as mathematics or science. Sri Lankan pre-service teachers were more likely to describe teachers in terms of those who helped them master a particular subject, attain a body of knowledge, or who modeled appropriate behavior. These cultural differences appear to be closely related to the trends found in the current study, where Sri Lankan teachers are more likely to select direct behavioral interventions as means toward academic objectives, while American teachers (Gorrell & Trentham, 1992) tend to choose the indirect, more motivational and emotional approaches for resolving academic problems.

More fully developed studies are necessary in order to ascertain the nature and degree of differences in teacher helping across cultures. As the study of learner self-efficacy and teacher responsiveness progresses, we may expect to understand more fully the conditions that promote student motivation to succeed. Teachers across cultures may profit from explicit knowledge of research based

upon self-efficacy theory and from knowledge of the relative effectiveness of interventions designed to improve self-efficacy beliefs, effort, or performance.

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Table 1

Total Number of First-Choice Selections of Each Strategy for Each Scenario*

Response	Scenario number 1	2	3	4	5	6	Total	%
A	51	32	38	28	30	34	213	15.9
B	172	62	78	68	74	76	530	39.7
C	0	89	60	77	67	62	355	26.6
D	0	44	47	49	51	47	238	17.8
Missing	13	9	13	14	14	17	80	

Note. A = Verbal persuasion

B = Enactive attainments

C = Modeling

D = Physiological state (reduction of anxiety)

* N = 236 for each scenario

Table 2

Total Number of First-Choice Selections of Each Strategy for Efficacy Category and Type of Problem

Type of Problem	Strategy	Efficacy Category: Low	Moderate	Total	%
Lack of Confidence	A	51	28	79	18
	B	172	68	240	54
	C	0	77	77	17
	D	0	49	49	11
Lack of Effort	A	32	30	62	14
	B	62	74	136	30
	C	89	67	156	35
	D	44	51	95	21
Low Performance	A	38	34	68	16
	B	78	76	154	35
	C	60	62	122	28
	D	47	47	94	21
Across All Problems	A	121	92	213	16
	B	312	218	530	40
	C	149	206	355	27
	D	91	147	238	18

Note. A = Verbal persuasion
B = Enactive attainments
C = Modeling
D = Physiological state (reduction of anxiety)